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IN SEARCH OF A SYNTHESIS.

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LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION SHOULD BE A SYNTHESIS OF THE BEST OF ALL METHODS. NO METHODOLOGY OR COMBINATION OF METHODOLOGIES WILL CHANGE THE FACT THAT LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE IS THE ACQUISITION OF A COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT SKILL AND CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED ONLY WITH A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND WORK ON THE PART OF BOTH TEACHER AND STUDENT. HOWEVER, IF, WITH THE LIMITED HUMAN RESOURCES AVAILABLE, STUDENTS ARE TO HAVE SUFFICIENT PRACTICE IN LISTENING, REPEATING, AND PRACTICING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO ALTERNATIVE OTHER THAN TO USE MACHINE AIDS IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION. EVEN THE CONTROVERSIAL TECHNIQUES OF MIMICRY AND MEMORIZATION AND PATTERN DRILLS CAN CONTINUE TO BE IMPORTANT IF THEIR LIMITATIONS ARE REALIZED. ALTHOUGH CONCENTRATION ON ORAL SKILLS MIGHT LEAD TO NEGLECTING THE ACQUISITION OF THE OTHER BASIC SKILLS, THE PASSIVE SKILLS CAN BE TAUGHT EFFECTIVELY AT A LATER STAGE. AT THE INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED LEVELS, THE ACTIVE SKILLS MAY CONTINUE TO BE PRACTICED AND PERFECTED ALONG WITH THE STUDENT'S LEARNING OF CULTURE AND LITERATURE, BUT FEW STUDENTS WILL ACQUIRE ACTIVE LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE IN THE CLASSROOM AT THESE LEVELS IF THEIR INITIAL EXPOSURE HAS BEEN ONLY TO THE PASSIVE SKILLS. THEREFORE, IT IS NOT A QUESTION OF WHICH ELEMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING IS THE MOST IMPORTANT, BUT WHICH IS TO BE TAUGHT FIRST. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 49, NUMBER 1, JANUARY 1965, PAGES 19-21. (AB)

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In Search of a Synthesis

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THE thesis and antithesis of language instruction obviously are the traditional method of language teaching and the relatively new audio-lingual technique. It is not easy to establish which of the two is the thesis. Certainly the audio-lingual approach chronologically does not merit this classification. However, since in recent years it has occupied the center of the stage, perhaps one may be justified in so designating it. It is now clear that the inevitable reaction is setting in, and that the audio-lingual method is coming under fire both from the traditionalists and from some of its former supporters.

I have been sharply reminded of this by two recent articles in *The Modern Language Journal:* one, by Theodore Huebener, entitled "The New Key is Now Off-Key,"[1] and the other, "The Bewildered Modern Language Teacher," by Max Zeldner;[2] both critical of certain elements of audio-lingual methodology; and by the April 1963 bulletin of the North Dakota Education Association, *Modern Language News*, which dedicates several pages to opinions generally unfavorable to the audio-lingual approach. Stressed particularly are the slowness and monotony of oral drills, the overemphasis on mimicry and memorization, the neglect of other skills because of the concentration on oral work, the strain on the teacher, and the fact that the laboratory is not indispensable to good language training.

This reaction against the audio-lingual method is not only inevitable, it is also desirable. Many language teachers, and perhaps even more notably, many superintendents and principals assumed that the new method possessed some magic quality. It was thought that a language laboratory would automatically instill in the student a knowledge of the foreign language, that drills would allow him to master the patterns of the language without obliging him ever to struggle with the grammatical principles upon which the drills are based. I think we all recognize the falsity of these assumptions now, and can be glad that their erroneousness is being recognized.

This does not mean, however, that there is not also a danger inherent in the reaction against the extremes of the audio-lingual methodology. The danger is that the pendulum may now be carried to the other extreme, to the antithesis, rather than stopping in the middle,

[1] Vol. XLVII, No. 8 (December, 1963), pp. 375–377.
[2] Vol. XLVII, No. 6 (October, 1963), pp. 245–253.

rather than bringing about a synthesis which would conserve the best of both these methods.

I do not mean to imply that the articles cited represent the antithesis. Professor Huebener, particularly, is careful to limit his criticism to what he terms the "extreme features" of the audio-lingual approach, and to reiterate that "Essentially, the new methodology is sound." Mr. Zeldner is somewhat more critical, and I think, somewhat unfair, although many of his complaints certainly are valid. He hints that, in general, language teachers were doing as much as they could to teach active as well as passive skills before the advent of the new methodology. Yet, we all know of many, many teachers who were so bound by the traditional teaching methods inherited from the classical languages that the whole class period each day was devoted to discussion of grammar and to translation, so that even the more able students found themselves helpless when suddenly transplanted to the country whose languages they had studied. Mr. Zeldner also protests too much, perhaps, about the special conditions existing in the Army language schools. After all, this methodology has since been adapted very successfully in a great many high schools, colleges and universities where the academic realities do not permit the ideal conditions which, he thinks, existed in the military language classes. I find myself very much in sympathy with him, on the whole, in his criticism of the teaching machines. I still can not believe, however, that they are quite the ogre he paints them. It does not seem, for example, that machines were wholly responsible for the young French teacher's maternity leave, unless machines—and French teachers—have changed more these past few years than I had thought. Even Mr. Zeldner, however, has some kind words to say of the new methodology—although one may miss them unless he reads carefully—admitting that some of the approaches are "meritorious" and many of the techniques "effective."

I am concerned that many teachers who favor the traditional method of teaching languages, and who always have considered the new methodology suspect, may fail to observe the kind words said of audio-lingualism and consider only the adverse comments in order to justify discarding the audio-lingual techniques completely in favor of a return to the old ways; and this, in my opinion, would erase many of the gains which language study has made during the past decade.

To me it seems that, in our search for a synthesis, we should always keep in mind an axiom which, obvious though it is, has not been stated often enough: *The learning of a foreign language is the acquisition of a skill* (assuming that we are referring to active knowledge, both written and oral, of the language); it is a highly complex and difficult skill, but a skill none the less. Like any other skill, it must be practiced. It is always desirable, often necessary, for the student to understand the rule he is practicing if he is to derive maximum benefit from the drill, but it is as fruitless to devote so much of the class period to the explanation of grammar that little or no time is left for practicing these rules or patterns as it would be in a typing class to spend the major part of the semester discussing the theory behind the placing of the keys on the typewriter, rather than practicing striking them.

This should be kept in mind when one examines the criticism made of the techniques of the new methodology:

It is said that the audio-lingual method places a greater strain on the teacher. This is entirely true, but how can one imagine that the learning of a complex and difficult skill could be accomplished without the expenditure of a great deal of time and hard work on the part of both the teacher and the pupil. No methodology or combination of methodologies is going to change this. If, in the past, teachers—and students—had an easier time of it, it was largely because they undertook a much less demanding and arduous task: the acquisition of a passive knowledge of the language, not the mastery of the active skills. Today, however, no teacher can really consider himself worthy of the name if he can not impart an active knowledge of the language to his students, or at least to those among them who are capable of acquiring it.

It is said that other skills are neglected because of the concentration on oral work. Very well, let us give the student more opportunity to write, but let us also not forget that to write is, in essence, merely to record the spoken word by means of symbols; and that the learning of these symbols, in the case of the commonly

taught languages, is not a major task, once the student has mastered the patterns of the spoken language.

It is said that mimicry and memorization are over-emphasized. This probably is true and should be changed, but that does not mean that both these elements will not continue to be important. The change will necessarily consist in a realization of their limitations.

It is said that the pattern drills are slow and monotonous. As stated above, the mastery of a language is always time-consuming, and will continue to be so. Drills can be made less monotonous, probably, by varying them with different types of exercises. Translation, for example, provided it is translation *into* the foreign language, offers one kind of practice, and it deserves a place in our teaching. It should not, however, preempt the varied drills which are to be found in good adaptations of the audio-lingual approach. Neither should we think that dullness and monotony are reserved for pattern drills. A certain amount is unavoidable in any approach. Does anyone recall having spent every moment of any basic language course in a state of continual excitement and delight?

It is said that the language laboratory is not indispensable to good language training, that the language laboratory is an expensive luxury. As has been stated, machines possess no magic quality, and could readily be dispensed with if there were sufficient human resources available: enough good teachers so that all classes could be kept very small, and tutors, preferably native speakers, to coach the students individually outside the classroom. Unfortunately, sufficient human resources are not available, and, therefore, we have no alternative but to use the machine if the student is to have sufficient practice in listening to the language, repeating the foreign words, and practicing the pattern drills.

It is also said that, because of the emphasis on the active knowledge of the language, the student is no longer learning enough about the literature and culture of the country whose language he is studying. This is, perhaps, unavoidable at the elementary level. At the intermediate level, it certainly need not be so. Here at the University of Wyoming I teach an intermediate Spanish course called Introduction to Hispanic Literature. Students ordinarily take this course after having completed the elementary course and concurrently with a course in intermediate composition, conversation and grammar review. The students vary from freshmen with three or four years of high school Spanish behind them to seniors who became interested in Spanish relatively late in their academic career. Except for about ten minutes in the first class period in which the goals, procedures and assignments of the course are discussed in English, all the work is carried on in Spanish. The students discuss poems, plays, short stories, abbreviated novels. They discuss plot, motivation, character development, cultural implications, moral implications, theme, versification, emotional and logical content of words. . . . When one student does not understand a word or a phrase, another student explains using another word or a paraphrase in Spanish. Almost never is there need to resort to English. Each student also writes a number of short, critical compositions in Spanish each semester in which he analyzes works which he has read and discussed in class. Tests are entirely essay. No English is permitted. I believe that the student in such a course penetrates more deeply into the foreign culture, literature, and ways of thinking and acting than he could ever do if he only read in Spanish, but spoke and wrote in English.

Essentially, the same kind of course can be taught in the high school in the third or fourth year of language study; but neither in the high school nor in the university can it be done if the basic skill, the active knowledge of the language, has not been thoroughly inculcated at the elementary level.

It may be said, then, that it is not a question of which element of language learning is most important, but which is to be taught first. If the active skills are given precedence at the elementary level, they may continue to be practiced and perfected at the intermediate and advanced level while at the same time the student is becoming acquainted with the foreign culture and literature. If the elementary course teaches only or principally the passive skills, few students will ever acquire an active knowledge of the language at the intermediate or advanced level *in the classroom.*